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955 people had reconciled themselves to comparative poverty: abundance of children in contrast to the abundance of goods. When I asked her if they gave the children any special food, she answered: "No, certainly not. They eat the same food as the older people. If they want to eat, we let them eat. If they do not want to eat, who is to be blamed?" Children's mealtimes were a matter of convenience. They asked for food when they were hungry, receiving a crust of bread if the adult was not too busy.

The mother-in-law usually took care of the children, especially while they were babies, because she was considered more capable and experienced than the young mother. There were cases in the village where a comparatively young mother-in-law took such complete care of her son's children that the mother of the children did not know what it meant to have children and to care for them.

When people went to work in the fields and there was no woman to remain with them in the home, the children were left by themselves on the streets.

"Doesn't the Village Council do anything to aid these children?" I asked.

"Oh, the *Obshtina* takes care of some children, but what can it do when it is not from the same blood? It is only to shut the eyes and the mouths of the peasants for the very high taxes they pay to the *Obshtina.*"

The children were not well dressed. Their clothes were often dirty and ragged. One tired mother of several complained: "Can a child keep anything on his back clean and not torn? Now you put on his back something clean and new, and when he returns from playing in the street it is all wet, dirty, and often torn. So children do not deserve to have good and new clothes." Often their clothes were made out of garments discarded by adults, though they did receive new garments at Christmas.

● 858 593 But even though the peasants did not "tremble over" their children, they valued them highly. When they first came they were tokens of a successful marriage. The husband and wife had both borne fruit and so had conformed to the expected life cycle. As the children grew older, however, they became important as economic

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assets. They could do hard work; they could run countless errands. 858
Later, they were the heirs to the father's fields and the chief support of the parents in their declining years.

One of the first women I interviewed about family life told me: "I had a little boy but he died when forty days old. Now I cannot help crying every St. George's Day [May 6] and every St. Dimiter's Day [November 8] when my husband goes out to hire a boy to care for our sheep. If my son had lived, he could have taken care of the sheep for us."

Later on in the course of a conversation with a garrulous *baba* I asked her if she did not think her seven children too many for one woman to have. She snorted, pointed out of the window to her sons unloading wood they had gathered in the forest, and said: "If I hadn't had lots of children, who would go to get our wood?"

Sons were greater economic assets than girls but even so would 858
have normally received more attention in this man-centered society. 562
As parents often had to go to some expense to get their daughters 593
married off, they were always jubilant at the arrival of a son. The good-natured priest was occasionally the butt of a number of sly jests because he had three daughters and no son. One man in particular, Stefan, who had been in the same predicament, had recently acquired a son, who was now the apple of his eye. He was fond of his daughters, but made no secret of his particular pride in his boy. I thoroughly enjoyed a conversation between Stefan and the priest in which Stefan fully explained how to be sure the next one was a boy. I have known of fathers who refused to look at the newly arrived infant upon learning that it was a girl. Of course, they eventually acquiesced and simply hoped for better luck next time. Where parents had no sons, village curiosity reached a peak when a new child was expected, and an occasional wager was laid on the possibility of its being a boy. But favoritism was the exception rather than the rule. When you asked a Dragalevtsy parent which child he liked best he responded: "I like them all equally; they are just like the fingers on one's hand." He often added the proverb, "The fingers on one's hand feel pain equally, do they not?"

Whenever a child suffered from a physical or mental handicap 732
Dragalevtsy parents, like most parents around the world, were more 593
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[369] 857 With Sofia, a city of over a quarter million people, only five miles away, the ability of the villagers to resist, however passively, the influence of the "people of the world" was astonishing. It was a remoteness, not to be measured in miles, but in generations.

Such pleasant customs as keeping pets were almost nonexistent. The tiny puppies with which the children sometimes rolled were bred for strictly utilitarian purposes, to guard the sheep, and were taught to be unfriendly to man.

[888] The very young and the very old in the village spent much time together. When I was taken to pay my respects to the oldest man in the village, a venerable figure of over a century, we found him sitting in a sunny corner of the yard under a gnarled pine tree. Tumbling around him were half a dozen tiny children, somewhat hampered in their movements by their clumsy, heavy clothing but very proud to show off their ancient relative.

The older children derived a quiet amusement from their position as spectators at the village ceremonies. There were always little boys making merry along the path of a wedding procession or tramping along wide-eyed beside a funeral. At *Subori* and *hora* mischievous little boys were ubiquitous. The little girls stayed solemnly by their mothers; only their eyes wandered, alternately solemn and amused. The village child had no routine planned for him, either for his physical or his psychological needs. There was no emphasis upon self-expression for the child, only upon conformity to the routine of the family.

858 593 Yet there was warmth and affection for the children. When a child died, the tempo of the household perceptibly slackened. "It is God's will. It is Kismet [Fate]," the family said, but the father grew more taciturn and the mother wept silently as she spun in the evenings. And when a funeral procession reached the cemetery, the new mourners often found there other mothers who had lost their children. These wailed again for the long-departed and begged the spirit of the newly dead to carry messages to their babies.

And when a family grew rich according to village standards, it was on the children that gifts were lavished, perhaps a wish-fulfillment by the elders inherited from their own drab childhood.